

Peer mentoring

Barbara Kensington-Miller

Question:

What is peer mentoring and are there any benefits of peer mentoring for Māori and Indigenous academics?

Answer:

What is peer mentoring?

The contemporary model of mentoring is based on a traditional concept where two people work together in a relationship; one partner, the mentor, is usually older and more experienced, and will support, guide and counsel the other younger and less experienced partner, the mentee (Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Kram, 1988; Melville & Bartley, 2010). Within education, mentoring is typically found with pre-service or beginning teachers paired with a more experienced or senior one to assist and lead them through their first years.

Peer mentoring is a variation of this long-established model. The peer mentoring that I have set up at the University of Auckland with university academics involves both partners being more or less at the same level of experience, and within each pair the partners can simultaneously be mentor and mentee at any one time (Ehrlich, Tennent, & Hansford, 2002; Kensington-Miller, 2007).

Two different models of peer mentoring

I have established two different models of peer mentoring. In one, partners work together in pairs, and in the other, in groups of up to ten to facilitate growth and development in their teaching or research. For either model, it is important to have a coordinator to organise the process, as well as to be mediator and advisor if needed.

For the first model of peer mentoring, members of an academic group wanting to be involved fill out a questionnaire giving details of their position and a bit about themselves to assist the coordinator matching the pairs. Commitment is expected for a negotiated period, usually about one semester, and can be renewed or renegotiated if the pair wishes to continue at the end of this time. This commitment consists of one group meeting every month and then individual pairs meet between these times at least once, preferably twice.

Each pair is given some small tasks to work on related to the meetings which will assist their progress. This helps the pair to get established and for the relationship to build. Pairs can meet wherever they choose; some may prefer each other's office, some meet over coffee or lunch, and some even at the pub!

The monthly meetings are organised around the focus of the group, which for academics is supporting research and/or teaching in some way. The meeting times usually range between an hour to an hour and a half and will cover a debriefing session on the previous month, a new teaching time related to the monthly focus, and the tasks to be worked on with the peer mentoring. Teaching sessions can vary from developing SMART goals or examining work-life balance issues, to different aspects of academic writing and critiquing. SMART goals, if you haven't heard this term, are goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely. The atmosphere at the meetings is friendly and most groups provide food and drink to ensure this.

The second model of peer mentoring is more commonly known as a writing group. Between six and ten members will meet together on a regular basis for a specified time to critique writing and provide feedback. In this model, the role of the coordinator is to organise times and venue and a roster for those involved presenting their work. Prior to each session, two people send their writing to the rest of the group to be read. At the meeting, the time is then shared equally for the two presenters and feedback is given from each member in turn. Ground rules are essential so that the feedback sessions run smoothly and fairly, and the role of the coordinator is critical for time keeping and for leading the meetings. Notes on the responsibility of the reader and how to critique are given to make the process a positive experience for the writer.

How is peer mentoring beneficial for Māori and Indigenous academics?

The first model was offered to a group of Māori academics and Māori general staff working together for advancement. Ten staff took up this opportunity for a semester and pairs were matched according to what their goals were focused on. These ranged between teaching, research, promotion, administration, management and leadership. Some had more than one focus. The questionnaire was also adapted to include questions about tribal affiliation, their level of spoken te reo Māori and whether they would prefer a te reo speaking peer mentor if possible.

Most found that having the same cultural background was valuable and that being Māori was important to them because

as a cohort of Māori tertiary staff, its good just to bring the people together, you know, because that's their common bond, they're all Māori staff, here for the university, for the Māori students. (Māori academic 1)

They commented on their enjoyment of being able to “meet with other Māori people as they understand the Māori way, laughing, and being on the same wavelength”. Many felt it was also important to support Māori, especially as they were few in numbers compared with other groups, and the huge expectations many felt were placed on them “to do all of the rituals and protocols and manaaki tangata which take us out of our job, as Māori staff are so thin across the university”. One Māori academic described their peer mentoring relationship as being:

a real privilege to be a Māori working with other Māori ... the benefits you get are that your culture is affirmed you're politically in touch with what's happening in the Māori world because you can discuss things with other Māori, understand those things iwi politics or why your family is falling apart because there is a dispute over some land ... it's that sort of thing and so, yeah, it's a privilege. (Māori academic 2)

One of the limitations of peer mentoring for this group was distance. Some of them were located quite a distance from each other across the campus and with busy schedules this meant the timing was not always easy. Mentoring was particularly important for those working in areas with no other Māori staff. Because of the isolation, being involved in peer mentoring gave much needed support, as another Māori academic explained:

Māori staff in the Māori Studies department enjoy a kind of mutual support that others outside Māori Studies don't have in terms of being Māori and some of the issues that you face as a Māori staff member.... the sort of support that we take for granted in this building ... we probably don't realise how lucky we are. (Māori academic 3)

Thus, it would appear that the potential for peer mentoring to support cultural identity is significant, especially for indigenous groups who are comparatively small in number but have large expectations placed on them. For Māori, being peer mentored together provided motivation, encouragement and pastoral care which related to their culture and situation as a minority group within a large establishment, giving them the confidence necessary for advancement.

References

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Author Notes

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Dr Barbara Kensington-Miller is a lecturer with the Academic Practice Group at the Centre for Academic Development, University of Auckland. The main focus of her work is on support for early-career academics.

E-mail: b.kensington-miller@auckland.ac.nz